



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the inquiry meeting held on 6th October 2016

Witness:

Nick Booth set up Podnosh in 2005 to work with government and the third sector to grow the civic conversation online. He is a former BBC political reporter and television and radio documentary maker. At the BBC He specialised in local government and parliamentary reporting and produced the Radio 4 documentary series Analysis - which explores political, social and cultural issues.

He was one of a couple of dozen bloggers invited to cover the G20 Summit in April 2009. He was among a small group who established the **Birmingham Bloggers** group in 2007. With this and his experience of telling the stories of active citizens through the Grassroots Channel Nick has been instrumental in establishing a thriving hyperlocal blogging community in the Midlands.

In 2012 he accepted a **Prime Minister's Big Society** award on behalf of the **Social Media Surgery** movement he founded. He was listed in **The Independent on Sunday's Happy List 2012** of 100 "outstanding people whose volunteering, caring, fund-raising, mentoring, charity founding, or selflessness makes Britain a more contented, better-adjusted, supportive, and happier place." Nick has worked with Birmingham University on their [21st century Public Servant](#) project.

Nick was also part owner and Community Director of **Help Me Investigate**, set up to allow citizens to ask civic questions and collaborate with each other to find the answers.

Present:

Andy Mycock

Cllr Andrew Marchington

Cllr Andrew Palfreeman

Cllr Andrew Marchington

Cllr Andrew Cooper

In Attendance:

Carl Whistlecraft, Spencer Wilson, Diane Sims and Helen Kilroy

Summary of Discussion

The Citizen and the Council

Nick explained that an important consideration in this context is that councillors do not feel that they have the time, opportunity or capacity to effectively lead on policy issues. This is explained by an increasing propensity for councillors to be locked into the council's transactional processes whereby a considerable amount of time is spent on being a channel for resident problems. This is an increasing problem given that services are reducing and has resulted in councillors becoming stuck in a "super officer" role whereby they have some additional power but do not have the means by which to solve problems. The traditional electioneering and political behaviours exacerbate this situation as much of it is based on promising to "fix things" or making things happen. Such behaviours are based on old fashioned views of how people consume media. Officers also behave in traditional structured ways which channel people towards services as opposed to building networks and trust in communities, and thereafter nurturing what grows out of that

Nick felt that if councillors remain stuck in this impossible position there will be no one effectively understanding and being a champion for communities. The councillor and the council need to find a way to be in and about the community, recognise what is happening and connect people more effectively. This will see the development of networked places rather than platforms rather than channels which simply bring challenges and service demands.

The Commission explored the potential implications of regional devolution in the above context. Nick described regional devolution as having a "fig leaf of democracy", potentially a committee of senior politicians with a Mayor. In light of this it is therefore unlikely that this will result in a more vibrant and better connected form of local democracy. It is therefore important for councils and councillors to grow the civic conversations and relationship where you are and for the citizens you represent. This will change the extent of confidence that councillors have to represent and advocate the issues affecting their area in the regional setting.

The Electoral Cycle

Nick explained that, in the context of the above, the greater frequency of elections can play an important part in influencing the approach that a councillor is able to take. Where councillors are more secure there is probably a greater ability to plan over a longer time frame but even in such circumstances sitting councillors are often assisting their ward colleagues to get elected. As a consequence it can mean that councillors may realistically only have 18 months to get things done and are less able to nurture, support and develop networked communities. Building these relationships takes time and confidence. At a strategic level a four yearly cycle does enable continuity and consistency which facilitates planning over a longer time frame.

The Role of the Councillor

Nick explained that if councillors continue to operate in traditional ways (i.e. paternalistic, attending committees, voting, feeding the decision making machine etc) in a digital age this will take place in isolation and be increasingly ignored by both the public and the press. Furthermore it is important to understand what people are actually using the internet for. Citizens are using it to share interests and space, collaborate, network i.e. they are using it for civic good irrespective of what the local authority is doing. It is for these reasons why councillors and officers need to focus efforts in these areas, join in as an equal and use the resources they have at their disposal to positively contribute. This will involve councillors (and officers) being human and empathetic.

In terms of citizens understanding the councillor role Nick explained that it is important for them to have a reason to be interested. This is more likely to happen where you take an interest in them, based around very tangible and practical things. There is an opportunity for councillors to tap into the social capital that people share with their networks which may result in a broadening of understanding of the councillor role as a by-product. The more councillors network in a civic way, the closer the relationship becomes and consequently it becomes easier to develop realistic expectations and have difficult conversations when necessary.

In the context of digital technology Nick explained that it is important for politicians to use the tools to share what they are doing, acknowledge accomplishments, give credit, share ideas and develop good will. Mobile technology makes this easy. The "networked leader" can be human and if they falter or fall they can draw on the support of their network in a way that the "heroic leader" can't.

Nick explained that ongoing sharing, blending on-line and off-line, is important as citizens are able to tell insincere approaches whereby politicians only use digital tool at election times. The habit of politicians at election times is "it's about me" and the tendency is that citizens tune this out and are turned off by such approaches.

The Next Generation of Councillors

Nick provided examples of a number of young councillors in Birmingham who use social media effectively and understand that sharing is an important part of behaviour on-line.

At times the political party machine does not help this situation. In terms of the wider community there are an awful lot of residents who are involved in "doing civic stuff" independently. Some of those might want to become councillors but do not want to be part of a party political system. Parties are well placed to find these types of people given their presence on-line which may be a good thing in terms of attracting the next generation of councillors.

Citizens and Decision Making

Nick provided the Commission with examples of work which has taken place to involve citizens in the decision making processes. One such example involved working with councillors in a ward committee context. On the one hand there is a formal governance component to this although the majority of the work involves a more relaxed and inclusive approach to meetings alongside a proactive attempt to do business in a different way. This involves bringing people together around issues or taking conversations to particular places. This is supported by a local blog, where minutes and agendas are posted, which is intended to be more effective in connecting the community.

Another example is a hyper local blog in Birmingham covering 5,000 dwellings on a council estate which has over 10,000 “likes”. As a result work is taking place, through PACT meetings and outside, to share information across agencies etc. This has involved live streaming meetings on Facebook which has begun to widen the reach and the community conversations beyond the “usual suspects”.

In the Black Country a community chest is being used to support crowd funding, encouraging the local community to determine priorities and thereafter put up crowd funding to determine the level of public support. This approach uses technology, relationships and individual social capital to address an important local issue. As a consequence the approach encourages enterprise and gets the council to think in a more entrepreneurial way and shifts thinking away from the notion that the council does and funds everything.

Nick explained that such approaches are useful to all citizens and are enhanced and enriched by a culture of openness in terms of information sharing. Open data provides great opportunities in this context although this is predicated on an instinct to trust, share and collaborate. Councils should contribute to the overall civic conversation, not own and drive it. Social media surgeries are an example of building networks (public, councillors and officer) through learning together.

Digital Technology

Nick explained that the Government Digital Service (GDS) has done some good work taking bureaucratic tasks (e.g. renewing car tax) and made it almost effortless. These are good examples where digital services can remove effort and save time and money but also begins to change the relationship.

The important consideration is not to focus solely on the digital tools (e.g. a consultation tool) without taking time and effort to grow the civic conversation. Taking traditional models and digitising them will not change the situation beyond using new tools to engage the same people but in a different way. It is of fundamental importance to think about why you are consulting, is it sincere, the questions you are asking and the language you are using. It is also crucial to be clear if you are using digital tools to garner the opinion of those who are used to using the internet to talk about civic matters. If not it is important to go into communities and work with help them to facilitate their engagement.

Nick explained that digital technology makes the development of a different kind of democracy easier as it facilitates the ability for citizens to connect and for councils and councillors to nurture those networks and focus on the quality of the place. This may mean we have bigger wards with fewer councillors who are effectively supported to develop this form of democracy.

Nick explained that traditional consultation should be replaced with an ongoing conversation which allows for a pause to take a snap shot to explain actions and decisions. Nick acknowledged that this is challenging but the internet presents opportunities to explore this in more detail. Such approaches allow councillors to “explore their thinking out loud” in between elections as opposed to presenting citizens with the complete idea or a fully formulated solution. In effect we are replacing consultation with an ongoing conversation.

The Commission explored the extent to which party politics impinges on making the above approach work. Nick explained that party politics play primarily to the traditional media model, a model which the public are paying less attention to. Where councillors have developed those local networks and relationships the emerging conversations on-line are likely to be more human and defensive of the councillor position.

With regards to the media Nick explained that ideally the local media should be part of the civic conversation although the context is less transparent and more about “deal making” around stories. It is therefore important for councillors to get their own messages out there first, thus preventing the media from distorting the message. "If you know it, share it, now." – this will build trust with the public.